

Message Text

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11

ACTION EUR-25

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-07 H-03 INR-11 L-03

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FM AMEMBASSY LONDON

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 3751

INFO AMEMBASSY BONN

AMEMBASSY BRUSSELS

AMEMBASSY COPENHAGEN

AMEMBASSY DUBLIN

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TAGS: UK, PINT

SUBJECT: LIBERALS ASSEMBLE AS ELECTION LOOMS

REF: LONDON 9854

SUMMARY - A MAJOR FIGHT OVER COALITION POLICY THREATENS
TO MAR PROCEEDINGS AT THIS WEEK'S LIBERAL PARTY ASSEMBLY
IN BRIGHTON. THORPE WANTS TO KEEP HIS OPTIONS OPEN, BUT
LEFT-WING LIBERALS WANT TO SCUTTLE IN ADVANCE ANY PROSPECT
OF A CONSERVATIVE-LIBERAL COALITION AFTER THE NEXT
GENERAL ELECTION. END SUMMARY.

1. THE LIBERAL PARTY IS ASSEMBLING IN BRIGHTON FOR ITS
ANNUAL CONFERENCE (SEPTEMBER 11-14), AMID INCREASING
SPECULATION THAT HAROLD WILSON HAS DECIDED ON OCTOBER 10
AS THE DATE FOR THE NEXT GENERAL ELECTION. SOURCES CLOSE TO
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THE LIBERAL PARTY LEADERSHIP INFORMED US LAST WEEK

THAT IF WILSON ACTUALLY ANNOUNCED THE ELECTION BY SEPTEMBER 9, THE LIBERALS WOULD CANCEL THEIR CONFERENCE OUTRIGHT, AND THAT IF HE ANNOUNCED IT SEPTEMBER 10 OR 11, THEY WOULD RESTRICT THEMSELVES TO A ONE-DAY "RALLY" ON SEPTEMBER 11. THEY ARE NOW FRANKLY SURPRISED OVER WILSON'S APPARENT LSLLING-NESS TO LET THEM GO AHEAD WITH A FULL CONFERENCE AND TO GAIN THE BENEFIT OF THE EXCESSIVE MEDIA COVERAGE IT WILL ATTRACT. HIS DECISION INEVITABLY PROMPTS THE SUSPICION THAT HE IS CALCULATING THAT ANY RESULTANT INCREASE IN LIBERAL STRENGTH WILL COME MAINLY AT TORY EXPENSE.

2. THE MAIN POINT AT ISSUE IN BRIGHTON THIS WEEK WILL BE THE PARTY'S POLICY ON ENTERING A COALITION GOVERNMENT. YOUNG LIBERALS AND MANY IN THE LEFT OF THE PARTY VEHMENTLY OPPOSE ANY TALK OF COALITION BECAUSE, IN THE FACE OF LABOR'S STEADFAST REJECTION OF COALITION, FOR THE LIBERALS IT COULD IN EFFECT ONLY MEAN COALITION WITH THE TORIES. LIBERAL LEADER JEREMY THORPE THOUGHT HE HAD DRAWN THE HEAT OUT OF THIS ISSUE BY HIS ADVOCACY LAST JULY OF A "GOVERNMENT OF NATIONAL UNITY", I.E., AN ALL-PARTY GOVERNMENT (PARA 2, REFTEL).

3. THIS PAST WEEKEND, HOWEVER, THE ISSUE ERUPTED AGAIN. YOUNG LIBERALS TOOK EXCEPTION TO A STATEMENT BY THORPE THAT IN THE FINAL ANALYSIS THE LIBERAL MPS ELECTED AT THE NEXT ELECTION WOULD HAVE TO MAKE THE DECISION ABOUT WHETHER OR NOT TO ENTER A COALITION. IN HARSH AND INTEMPERATE LANGUAGE THEY BRANDED THORPE A "TRAITOR" AND PROMISED TO STAGE A FIGHT WHEN THE QUESTION IS DEBATED ON THURSDAY (SEPTEMBER 12). THORPE HAS HURRIEDLY TRIED TO PACIFY THESE CRITICS BY INSISTING HE HAS BEEN MISUNDERSTOOD AND MIS-REPRESENTED, BUT THINGS COULD GET A BIT UNPLEASANT BEFORE THE WEEK IS OUT.

4. COMMENT: WE KNOW FROM OUR SOURCES IN THE LIBERAL PARTY AND ELSEWHERE THAT INFORMAL (AND INCONCLUSIVE) SOUNDINGS HAVE BEEN TAKEN ABOUT A POSSIBLE CONSERVATIVE-LIBERAL COALITION AFTER THE NEXT GENERAL ELECTION. THESE HAVE NOT BEEN FORMALLY SANCTIONED BY THE PARTY LEADERSHIP, NEITHER HAVE THEY BEEN DISCOURAGED. AWARENESS OF THESE SOUNDINGS UNDOUBTEDLY LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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PROMPTED THE BITTERNESS OF THE PERSONAL ATTACKS ON THORPE.

5. NONETHELESS, TO AN OUTSIDER, MUCH OF THE UPROAR OVER COALITION SEEMS POINTLESS, NOT TO SAY DAMAGING. UNTIL THE ELECTION RESULTS ARE IN, THE QUESTION REMAINS ACADEMIC; AFTER THE RESULTS ARE IN, IF A COALITION BECOMES A REAL POSSIBILITY, LIBERAL MPS WILL HAVE TO REVIEW THE SITUATION AS IT THEN EXISTS, TAKING INTO ACCOUNT FACTORS THAT SIMPLY

CANNOT BE FORESEEN. THEY MAY SEEK THE ADVICE OF THEIR PARTY,
BUT, AS THORPE HAS SUGGESTED, THE FINAL DECISION WILL HAVE TO
BE THEIRS.

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